



Coleridge's Transcendental Imagination: The Seascape beyond the Senses in "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner"

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Summary

This article shows how Coleridge's "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner" engages the reader in something akin to a dialectic process of making sense of the mariner's seascape. Analysis reveals that the poem does this by constantly confronting the reader within the same image with familiar and unfamiliar phenomena that she/he has to synthesise into a meaningful whole. The meaningful whole that comes into being as a result of the synthesis of opposites, suggests the idea that the whole is, as Coleridge put it, "grander" and "vaster" than we can comprehend, an idea that Coleridge advocated in several of his nonpoetic writings. Very specifically, the antithetical presence of familiarity and unfamiliarity creates confusion about the realm's visible features, until the imagination eliminates this confusion by synthesising the underlying antitheses. This argument is contextualised firstly (and briefly) against the background of the history of the idea of the dialectic, or the synthesis of opposites, and especially its development in German transcendental thought, and secondly, against aspects of Coleridge's own *ars poetica*, which was greatly influenced by German transcendental thought. Coleridge's indebtedness to the German thinkers of the time is the subject of much scholarly work. "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner", however, predates most of the important idealist writings. The article points out parallels between the composition of Coleridge's images in "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner" and the underpinnings of German transcendental thought. These parallels could indicate that Coleridge was influenced by early idealist writing or that he did indeed – as he claimed – think simultaneously and independently the same thoughts as the important German idealist thinkers of his time. Either way, the parallels indicate a *Zeitgeist* so strong that it found expression also in Coleridge's poetic output.

Opsomming

Hierdie artikel dui aan hoe Coleridge se "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner" die leser betrek by iets soortgelyk aan 'n dialektiese proses wanneer die leser sinmaak van die seevaarder se wêreld. Analise wys uit dat die gedig dit doen deur die leser voortdurend in dieselfde beeld te konfronteer met bekende en onbekende dinge wat die leser moet saamvoeg om 'n sinvolle geheel te vorm. Hierdie sinvolle geheel wat

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in wese kom as gevolg van die sintese van teenoorgesteldes suggereer dat die geheel, soos Coleridge dit stel, grootser en omvattender is as wat die mensdom kan begryp – 'n idee wat die digter gereeld in sy niepoëtiese werke benadruk het. Die antitetiese teenwoordigheid van die bekende en die onbekende skep verwarring oor die seelandskap se sigbare aspekte, totdat die verbeelding die verwarring uit die weg ruim deur die sintese van die onderliggende antitieses. Hierdie argument word eerstens (kortliks) gekontekstualiseer teen die agtergrond van die geskiedenis van die dialektiek, of die sintese van teenoorgesteldes, en spesifiek die ontwikkeling van die gedagte in Duitse transendentale idealisme. Tweedens word die argument gekontekstualiseer teen die agtergrond van Coleridge se eie *ars poetica* wat tot 'n groot mate beïnvloed is deur Duitse transendentale idealisme. Die invloed van die Duitse denkers op Coleridge is die onderwerp van vele studies. "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner" is egter gepubliseer voor die belangrikste Duitse transendentale-idealitiese tekste. Hierdie artikel wys parallele uit tussen die beeldskepping in "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner" en die onderbou van die Duitse transendentale denke. Die parallele kan aandui dat Coleridge beïnvloed is deur baie vroeë geskrifte van die Duitse transendentale idealiste of dat hy, soos hy herhaaldelik beweer het, gelyktydig en onafhanklik dieselfde idees as die belangrike Duitse denkers van sy tyd gehad het. In albei gevalle is die parallele aanduidend van 'n tydsgees so prominent dat dit neerslag gevind het in Coleridge se digkuns.

1 Introduction

Some twenty years ago, Norman Fruman's insightful article, "Ozymandias and the Reconciliation of Opposites" (1986), reflected on the influence of Coleridge's idea of the reconciliation of opposites on literary criticism. He showed how several scholars forced the idea of reconciled opposites in their readings of literary texts, pointing out that literature is often concerned with opposition. He remarks that "[u]nity as an aesthetic category is not something that exists objectively in the work of art. It is projected by the beholder" (1986: 76).

Fruman points out that whereas Coleridge's critical writings are saturated with the idea of the reconciliation of opposites, he never attempted to apply the concept in analysing poetry (p. 77) and he specifically refers to the absence of the reconciliation of opposites in "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner", asking "[w]hat, after all, is balanced or reconciled in "The Rime of the Ancient mariner?" (p. 85).

Whereas Fruman's article aptly addresses a significant flaw in contemporary literary criticism, showing how people went off on a tangent to demonstrate at all costs the reconciliation of opposites in literature, I do not think that the comment on "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner" is entirely true. The poem may deal with opposition on a thematic level, but in terms of the rendering of the seascape, Coleridge's imagery does confront the reader with underlying antitheses that can only be resolved dialectically, via the imagination. In this article I revisit the poem in the light of dialectics. The imagery that Coleridge uses may be seen as eliciting in the reader something akin to a dialectic process of making sense of what is described. The





analyses show how Coleridge confronts readers with images built on underlying antitheses, specifically familiarity and unfamiliarity, leading them to engage in a dialectic process to synthesise discrepancies to form a meaningful whole. The resulting meaningful whole suggests a sum that is bigger than its parts. The language used to describe the mariner's seascape contributes less to a visual picture of the space than to a sense of awe and wonder at a world that is greater and vaster than humans can comprehend. Put differently, Coleridge's images combine and synthesise familiar and unfamiliar phenomena and guide readers to reconcile these in such a way that they are constantly brought to an important realisation, namely that the world surpasses human understanding. Coleridge frequently advocated this view in his nonpoetry writings. I will show how the combination of familiarity and unfamiliarity in the images problematises visibility in the seascape projected in the poem and, as a result, readers are brought to a temporary glimpse of a transcendent reality, a state in which all antitheses are synthesised into a what was called shortly after the composition of the poem, the "absolute" or "absolute ego" in German philosophy.

The idea of the reconciliation of opposites that Coleridge advocated in his later prose writings is firmly grounded in German transcendental philosophy. I therefore start by briefly outlining the German transcendental idealist idea of synthesised opposites, and then proceed to consider its influence on Coleridge's *ars poetica*, in order to point to parallels between the composition of Coleridge's images in "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner" and idealist thought.

The fact that Coleridge was significantly influenced by German transcendental thought, especially thoughts related to the mind's and imagination's active role in shaping our realities, is generally accepted and has indeed catalysed most of the critical commentary on the poet since the 1980s.¹

1. Examples include Thomas McFarland's "A Complex Dialogue: Coleridge's Doctrine of Polarity and Its European Context" (1981) and William Crisman's "'Thus Far Had the Work Been Transcribed': Coleridge's Use of Kant's Precritical Writings and the Rhetoric of 'On the Imagination'" (1991). The latter takes issue with several misreadings of the famous "On the Imagination" chapter in *Biographia literaria* to show how Coleridge misappropriated Kantian ideas in his musings on the imagination. Tim Milnes (1999) considers the influence of post-Kantian philosophy on Coleridge's later nonpoetic writings and Alan Richardson (1999) shows how Coleridge dealt with the mind-body duality – a topic with which German transcendental philosophers also grappled. In an insightful earlier article, Daniel Stempel (1976) argues that Fichte's influence on Coleridge's thought was more profound than Schelling's. When considering Coleridge's prose writings and German transcendental idealism, critics usually focus their attention on *Biographia literaria*. The extent to which Coleridge translated, incorporated and plagiarised the thoughts of the German philosophers of the





Scholars have also extensively considered and explored the influence of transcendental thought on Coleridge's poetry. For example, Rookmaker (1987) argues that "Kubla Khan" draws strongly on what he refers to as the Romantic fall myth, the idea of recreating a "lost unity" between subject and object, which manifests in the work of several of the German transcendental idealists that Coleridge read, namely Kant, Schiller, Fichte, Schelling and Schlegel (Rookmaker 1987: 229).²

Whereas most scholars explore the influence of a specific text or philosopher on a specific, usually prose, text by Coleridge, I intend to show parallels between the structure underlying Coleridge's images in "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner", a text that predates most of the important idealist writings,³ and the structure underpinning German transcendental idealist thought. This section provides a working definition of the concept "dialectic". The definition will be used to explore Coleridge's image construction and to indicate how images in "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner" lure the reader into a process comparable to a dialectic process of making sense.

The article ends by briefly speculating, albeit inconclusively, on reasons for the above phenomenon. The parallels can be explored through analysis, but the question of influence remains in the realm of speculation because influence and the cross-pollination of thoughts can never be proven conclusively. The texts cited in this section serve mainly to contextualise and define the concept "dialectic" in order to establish parallels between the underlying structure of Coleridge's images and idealist thinking.

2 Dialectics: The Synthesis of Opposites

The word *dialectic* stems from Greek roots (*διαλεκτική*) and initially meant "conversation". In Pre-Socratic and Socratic philosophy it referred to "the logic of contradiction" (Delius 2000: 112) and described a method of philosophising whereby truth was investigated through dialogue. Socrates (c 470-399 BC) would, for instance, engage his interlocutor in a dialogue in a

time, in especially *Biographia literaria*, has indeed been the subject of much debate.

2. Brian Wilkie (1986) also explores the influence of transcendental thought on Coleridge's poetry. He uses the term "overlay", to refer to antithetical elements in poetry when he discusses several poems including "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner" and "Christabel".
3. Coleridge began writing the poem in 1797 and it was first published in 1798 in *Lyrical Ballads*. The most-cited version of the poem is the one published in *Sibylline Leaves* (1817) in which Coleridge added the marginalia and the epitaph.





manner that would reveal contradictions and inconsistencies in the latter's argument. Plato (c 428-348 BC) developed the concept to refer to knowledge that arises from conflicting opinions (Delius 2000: 112).

The term had several other usages in Aristotle's writings and in Eastern philosophies, and was resuscitated in Western philosophy by Immanuel Kant (1724-1804). He was part of a group of German philosophers of the late 1700s that grappled with issues relating to perception. Kant, in his *Kritik der reinen Vernunft* (1781), built a bridge between two philosophical traditions, namely rationalism and empiricism, or, as von Rintelen (1977: 3) puts it, "the philosophy of Immanuel Kant ... presents a synthesis between British empiricism and continental rationalism".

Kant synthesised these two traditions by distinguishing between knowledge a priori and empirical knowledge (Kant [1781]1910: 21). He stated "[t]hat all our knowledge begins with experience there can be no doubt" (p. 1), but he postulated that a priori knowledge sometimes presupposes experience and that our rational faculty shapes our experience into what we perceive to be objective reality (see for example Flew 1999: 189-193).

Kant appropriated the term "dialectic" from the ancient philosophers to describe the "'logic of appearances', the art which invests falsehood with the appearance of truth" (Delius 2000: 112). In a book entitled "Transcendental Dialectic" in *Kritik der reinen Vernunft*, Kant illustrated that "reason is bound to argue against itself and to contradict itself, if used to go beyond possible experience" (Popper 1940: 416).

A very important aspect of *Kritik der reinen Vernunft*, that attracted Coleridge's attention away from British philosophers to the German ones, was Kant's dictum that the mind is not just passively registering information, instead it actively brings into being what we perceive through our senses (Kant [1781]1910: 40-41).

Post-Kantian philosophers developed the idea that the mind is active in making sense of what the senses perceive. Both Johann Christoph Friedrich Schiller (1759-1805) and Friedrich Wilhelm Joseph von Schelling (1775-1854) were of the opinion that not the mind or rational faculty, but specifically the creative/productive imagination makes sense of the world around us. The imagination, they maintained, unifies contradictory aspects or duality into an all-encompassing whole.

In an attempt to elucidate Kant's writings, Johann Gottlieb Fichte (1762-1814) embroidered on Kant's concept of the dialectic in *Wissenschaftslehre* (1794). He too used the term to refer to a form of thought that included contradictions, a thought or idea that incorporated also its own negation. He emphasised that, from this contradiction, a new, higher synthesis could be reached (Delius 2000: 112). Fichte is often regarded as the philosopher that ascribed a very significant role to the imagination, placing it on a level that no other philosopher had claimed for it before (Stempel 1971: 372, Vater 1978: xvii). Fichte wrote in *Wissenschaftslehre* that the fundamental





antithesis, namely real and ideal, subject and object, precedes consciousness and that such antitheses are “bridged by the synthesising power of the imagination” (Stempel 1971: 372). All antitheses, Fichte maintained, are synthesised in what he called the “absolute ego”.

Friedrich Wilhelm Joseph von Schelling (1775-1854) elaborated on Fichte’s *Wissenschaftslehre* and, like Fichte, he tried to illuminate Kant’s writings. In *System des transcendentalen Idealismus* von Schelling argues that the “absolute” is the unity reached when “reality and ideal, nature and spirit, being and knowledge and all pairs of opposites are one” (Delius 2000: 79). It is a unity that goes beyond both conceptions and perceptions. Von Rintelen (1977: 12) writes that, for von Schelling, “[t]he polarity of nature and spirit finds synthesis in the absolute”. Von Schelling ([1800] 1971: 176) emphasised that the imagination or “productive intuition” is the synthesising force that resolves the tension between finitude and infinity. He explained that the imagination shapes experience into what we perceive to be reality (see for example Larmore 1996: 22).

The texts mentioned above all deal to some extent with the synthesis of antitheses by an active mind or creative imagination and influenced much of Coleridge’s convoluted nonpoetic writings. Coleridge took to the idea that the imagination was the highest faculty and he frequently advocated in his own nonpoetry writings that it was the imagination that reconciled antitheses, hence his habit of speaking, throughout *Biographia literaria*, of the imagination as a “unifying” or “modifying” faculty.

The method that several German philosophers of this époque used and described, became known in the time of Hegel as *the dialectic method*. The method entails that philosophers pointed out how antithesis can be resolved in a synthesis that presents a higher understanding. Von Schelling learned and developed this method from Fichte (Vater 1978: xiii-xiv), and Fichte from Kant who had appropriated it from the ancient philosophers, but it was Hegel who perfected it in *Phänomenologie des Geistes* (1807) seven years later and who gave it its name. In what follows I shall use the term “dialectic” to refer to the synthesis of antitheses where the synthesis presents a higher understanding.

3 Coleridge’s Ars Poetica

Around 1797 when Coleridge was writing “The Rime of the Ancient Mariner” and a number of other poems set in otherworldly spaces for inclusion in *Lyrical Ballads*, he wrote several autobiographical letters to his friend Thomas Poole. One specific letter, dated 16 October 1797, illustrates two important aspects of Coleridge’s world view at the time: the first is his preoccupation with the immensity of the universe, and the second is a





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profound distrust in the ability of the senses to bring one to a truthful view of the universe.

In this letter Coleridge remembers his childhood fascination with his father's narrations of things beyond the perceptible. He relates how he listened with awe and wonder to his father who told him about the stars and the planets (Coleridge [1797]2000: 503). This memory of his attraction to and fascination with what lies beyond the perceptible, leads Coleridge into his next thought, namely that his "early reading of Faery Tales, & Genii &c &c" (Coleridge [1797]2000: 503) "habituated" his mind "*to the Vast*" (p. 503; emphasis in the original). Contrary to popular opinion of the time (Prickett 1979: 4), Coleridge firmly believed that children should be permitted to read "Romances, & Relations of Giants & Magicians, & Genii" (Coleridge [1797]2000: 503); stories – in other words – that deal with the otherworldly. He writes:

I know no other way of giving the mind a love of "the Great", & "the Whole". – Those who had been led to the same truths step by step thro' the constant testimony of their senses, seem to me to want a sense which I possess – They contemplate nothing but *parts* – and parts are necessarily little – and the Universe to them is but a mass of *little things* I have known some who have been *rationaly* educated They were marked by a microscopic acuteness; but when they looked at great things; all became a blank & they saw nothing.

(Coleridge [1797]2000: 503; emphasis in the original)

Stories set in worlds other than the actual world, Coleridge explains, give the mind a love for "the Great" and "the Whole". These "Romances, & Relations of Giants & Magicians, & Genii" necessarily deal with things not to be found in actuality, things, in other words, that cannot be experienced. As such, they teach the mind that the universe is vast and inscrutable, that there is more to the world than our senses lead us to believe.

Embroidering on the same idea, Coleridge remembers that he never believed what he saw, touched or heard, but in a grandeur that is beyond the senses, explaining: "I never regarded my senses in any way as the criteria of my belief ... I regulated all my creeds by my conceptions not by my *sight* – even at that age" (Coleridge [1797]2000: 503; emphasis in the original). Coleridge here engages with the mind-senses duality with which the German philosophers also grappled. The poet concludes that he looks toward his "conceptions", i.e. his mental faculty, as opposed to his senses, for an explanation of the world and his conceptions dictate that the world is vast. "[T]he Vast", "the Great" and "the Whole" that Coleridge claims his "conceptions" bring into being, may suggest the harmony and unity that the German philosophers, shortly after the composition of this letter, called the "absolute" and the "absolute ego".





This notion of the immensity of the universe is reserved for those who let themselves be led by their conceptions and not for those who “trust the testimony of their senses”. People who trust their senses look at parts and see “nothing”; they cannot appreciate the world in its mysterious fullness and splendour. Fairy tales allow one to look beyond parts at the great and the whole – it allows one to *see*. The idea of looking beyond the parts to something bigger and more encompassing is reminiscent of the German idealist tradition that dictates that all opposites are harmonised into an all-encompassing whole.

The idea that one should not look at the particular, but at the vast, the great and the whole, is stated even more explicitly in the introductory quotation at the beginning of “The Rime of the Ancient Mariner”. Coleridge began writing the poem in the same year he wrote the letter to Poole discussed above,⁴ but he added the epitaph only in 1817. The epitaph relates that the whole also encapsulates the invisible. Coleridge quotes a passage from T. Burnet’s *Archaeologiae philosophicae: Sive doctrina antiqua de rerum originibus* (MDCXCII/1692). The passage may be translated as follows:

I can easily believe, that there are more invisible than visible Beings in the universe. But who shall tell us what family each belongs to, what their ranks and relationships are and what their respective distinguishing characters may be? What do they do? Where do they live? The human mind has always circled around a knowledge of these things without ever attaining it. I do not doubt that it is beneficial sometimes to contemplate in the mind, as in a picture, the image of a greater [grandeur] and better world; for if the mind [spirit/thoughts] grows used to the trivia of daily life, it may dwindle too much [may contract itself too much], and decline altogether into worthless thoughts. Meanwhile, however, we must be on the watch for the truth, keeping a sense of proportion so that we can tell what is certain from what is uncertain and day from night.

(Coleridge 2000: 49)⁵

As the whole of the universe also includes the invisible, it cannot be perceived merely by the senses. The whole is a synthesis of both the visible – that which can be experienced – and the invisible – that which can only be imagined. According to Rosemary Jackson (1981: 49), in fantasy literature,

4. During this time Coleridge was preparing several poems set in or dealing with otherworldly spaces for *Lyrical Ballads* such as “The Nightingale: A Conversation Poem”, “The Foster-mother’s Tale” and “The Dungeon”. He was also preparing “The Ballad of the Dark Ladie” and “Christabel” for this publication, but they were only published later. Coleridge’s preoccupation with that which cannot be experienced is easily deduced.
5. This is the translation (from the original Latin) found in Coleridge (2000: 49). Terms in square brackets are my suggested translations.





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that which is not seen and not said, is not known, and therefore remains a threat. Put differently, we equate that which we see with that which is possible and certain. The whole of the universe, Coleridge says, encompasses both knowable and unknowable, the possible and the impossible. Thinking about the universe in this way highlights its mystery, as the rhetorical questions in the first half of the passage suggest. Contemplating the image of a greater world, attunes the mind to the greatness and vastness of the universe – a universe that encompasses and synthesises all antitheses. As in the letter to Poole, Coleridge emphasises the fact that one can only appreciate the immensity and inscrutability of the universe by keeping in mind that the senses do not convey a complete picture of the world. Here, however, it is stated more urgently: one's spirit ("mens") may deteriorate if one does not keep in mind that there is more to the universe than meets the eye. Quoting Burnet, Coleridge warns that a focus on everyday things without wonder at the unseen and inexplicable is damaging for one's highest faculty. The Latin text states that the "mens" may (literally) contract itself into "pusillas cogitationes" (translated above with "worthless thoughts"), which is the diminutive form. A mind, not fixed on the great and the whole, will be habituated to think only small/little, worthless, inane thoughts. Coleridge's focus on the whole as well as on the role of the mind could have been gleaned from German transcendental philosophers. In a nutshell, the passage states that in order to contemplate the world in the correct manner, it is necessary to look beyond that which the senses perceive, as this approach leads one to a view of the great and the whole. This conception of the world as "great" and "vast" and "whole" filtered into the poems Coleridge wrote at the time, as will be shown shortly.

Reflecting on the composition of *Lyrical Ballads* (in which the poem was first published) in *Biographia literaria* some 20 years after the poem's composition, Coleridge recalls how he and William Wordsworth contemplated two types of poetry. The first type – which Wordsworth was to write for the volume – is poetry that adhered to the "truth of nature", whereas the second type – which was to be Coleridge's endeavour – is poetry of the imagination. Coleridge would write specifically about "incidents and agents ... supernatural". His efforts were to be directed to "persons and characters supernatural, or at least romantic; yet so as to transfer from our inward nature a human interest and a semblance of truth sufficient to procure for these shadows of imagination that willing suspension of disbelief for the moment, which constitutes poetic faith" (Coleridge 2000: 314). Coleridge's poetry would be focused on things beyond the perceptible, things indicating the unknowable. As poet, he would focus on the antithesis of the known, the perceptible and the visible and thereby create "shadows of the imagination" that would lure one to suspend one's disbelief to arrive at "poetic faith". Coleridge's contributions to *Lyrical Ballads* were to bring about a willing suspension of disbelief, not by drawing on "the truth of nature", i.e.





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actuality, but rather by creating scenes that would “procure” imagination. The willing suspension of disbelief is thus an exercise whereby the imagination is sustained and prolonged – a state where anything interfering with the imagination is suspended in order to arrive at poetic faith. “Poetic faith” will thus henceforth be used to refer to a state of engaged and prolonged imagination, a state where one cannot rely only on one’s senses. It is a state that tolerates antitheses to arrive at a sense of “the great” and “the whole”. Poetic faith depends on an active imagination – the type of imagination advocated by Kant’s successors. It is indeed necessary to look beyond the perceptible in order to contemplate the immensity and inscrutability of the universe. The ability to see the whole depends on poetic faith. In Coleridge’s poem “Love” (1799), the persona, Genevieve, embodies a listener/reader completely lost in poetic faith.

In light of Coleridge’s view of the world, its infinity and its incomprehensibility, it is little wonder that he views the act of creation as a divine action. The creator of “shadows of the imagination” that procure poetic faith is in Coleridge’s eyes a mythic and mystic being that engages with the highest faculty, namely the imagination. Primary imagination, he writes, is “the living power and prime agent of all human perception, and as a repetition in the finite mind of the eternal act of creation in the infinite I AM” (Coleridge [1817]2000: 313). The poet thus mimes God.

In creating poems and otherworldly spaces in poetry, the poet takes part in a mysterious and godly process. The act of writing is similar to divine creation; the poet repeats the eternal act of creation. “The Rime of the Ancient Mariner” and “Kubla Khan” depict such mythic and mysterious creators.

Both secondary imagination and fancy are lower forms of creation. Scholars have interpreted the primary and secondary imagination passage differently. They differ about the hierarchical order of primary and secondary imagination and consequently about which of the two the poet partakes. Crisman (1991: 412), for instance, writes that he believes that primary imagination is the “higher force”, among other things, because it is in line with “various other English senses of *primary* and *secondary*”. Barth (1986: 23 and 2005: 17-18), on the other hand, argues that secondary imagination is the higher form of imagination, grounding his argument in Coleridge’s dictum that all human beings use primary imagination. Stempel (1971: 379) shares this opinion, grounding his argument in Fichtean metaphysics.

As this article does not explore Coleridge’s conception of the nature of the imagination, I merely use the word “imagination” when referring to what Coleridge perceived as the higher mental faculty that synthesises antitheses.

Stephen Prickett succinctly summarises Coleridge’s distinction between imagination and fancy when he writes that the imagination is a “‘living power’ that transformed the elements with which it dealt, shaping them into





a new unity. Fancy ... [is] a mere 'dead arrangement' of 'fixities and definites': a scissors-and-paste job of the mind" (Prickett 1979: 6). Because fancy deals with "fixities and definites", it is an action or faculty guided by the senses. "The poet", writes Coleridge ([1817]2000: 392) in Chapter XXII of *Biographia literaria*, "should paint to the imagination, not to the fancy". Coleridge's romanticised view of the poet dictates that the poet should strive to attain the highest faculty of the mind; he should be inventive and creative. In the role that Coleridge ascribes to the creative imagination, the trace of German transcendental idealism is quite evident.

Coleridge views the world as utterly mysterious, a space that can only be assessed properly through the imagination. A poet painting to the imagination can render the world great and vast. Coleridge's *ars poetica* can be seen as an adapted expression of the world view held by the German philosophers of his time. Perry (1999: 5), states that after Coleridge had read German transcendental philosophy, several of his "old ambiguities persisted in a German-inflected voice". Coleridge's prose works emphasise the role of the mental faculty, specifically the creative imagination, in resolving antitheses and making sense of the world. Coleridge's mind was a complex one. Perry (1999: 4) points out that whereas Coleridge's intellect desired and reached after "inclusiveness and unity", his "sensibility [was] loyal to the diverse plenitude of its experience, to the felt world's discrete, divided-up particulars". In "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner" to which Coleridge returned "compulsively" (Perry 1999: 281), this duality is expressed. The poem foregrounds the imagination by problematising vision/visibility.

4 (In)visibility in "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner"

In "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner", Coleridge creates a mysterious seascape of which the configurations are different from those of seascapes found in actuality. One cannot grasp the seascape in this realm with reference to sensory experience only. Instead, one has to engage, through poetic faith and the synthesising imagination, with the realm created and consider that there are – as the quotation preceding the poem states – more invisible than visible phenomena in the world. One has to grasp that the world in the poem is a synthesis of experience and imagination.

In "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner" an eerie and ominous atmosphere prevails. Atmosphere, according to A.F. Scott (1985: 24), refers to the general mood of a literary work and is, among other things, brought about by the setting. The atmosphere is to a large extent a consequence of the metaphoric language that a poet uses.⁶ In what follows, I will consider how

6. It is interesting to note that John Keats uses synaesthetic images when describing otherworldly spaces in poems like "Eve of St Agnes" (1820) and





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Coleridge catalyses/activates the imagination through language, by directing attention away from that which the senses can apprehend towards that which lie beyond the senses.

This analysis of the images in the poem shows how the language appeals to the imagination, and how Coleridge uses language to make the invisible visible and the familiar strange. By so doing, he arrives at a sense of the greatness and vastness of the world and creates a world that can only be accessed through the imagination.

Coleridge constructs the seascape using images that foreground the invisible aspects of the world. Three of the four basic natural elements that are generally believed to constitute the world, namely fire (including the sun), water and air are described using images that suggest things beyond the perceptible. This means that the elements that make up the framework of the world described are vague and hinder the mind's eye from visualising the seascape in which the mysterious events and characters are set. Coleridge distorts the spatial configurations of the seascape through the use of images that foreground invisibility, unfamiliarity and uncertainty.

Similes normally contain both familiar and unfamiliar phenomena and relate them in such a way that they bring the unfamiliar within the frame of reference of the reader. They do so by comparing the unfamiliar or abstract with something known, giving one a point of reference to interpret the unfamiliar object (life (abstract) is like a garden (concrete/known)). A known and familiar vehicle carries over its meaning unto a lesser-known tenor. In "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner", as indeed in several other poems, Coleridge does the exact opposite. He compares phenomena to abstract or unfamiliar things, and thereby creates a world that is indistinct and difficult to picture. Ashton (1996: 127) points out that this type of simile on the one hand draws the experience nearer (as that is what we expect a simile to do) and on the other hand emphasises the unusualness of the experience. The sun in the mariner's seascape is described using such a simile. The mariner relates that

[n]or dim nor red, like God's own head,
The glorious Sun uprist:

(lines 97-98)

Here Coleridge compares something familiar (the sun) to something unfamiliar (God's head), leaving one with a very slight idea of what the sun in the mariner's world *looks* like. Even though one may know what the sun and a head (in actuality) look like, the fact that the sun is compared to *God's* head, casts the appearance of the sun, at least partially, into uncertainty. The unfamiliar vehicle ("God's head"; line 97) carries elements of the unknown

"Meg Merilies" (1838). These worlds have vastly different atmospheres than the ones Coleridge creates with images that contain underlying antitheses.





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and unfamiliar over unto the tenor ("Sun"; line 98). The example confronts one with something that cannot be seen merely by relying on the information given. One is led to access the known in terms of its antithesis, the unknown, instead of the other way around, and this can only be done by the imagination. In a state of poetic faith, can one *see* what is described and, again, the synthesising imagination dialectically makes sense of the disparate information in order to give shape to the object described. Put differently, what one sees is a product of one's imagination, a product that is, in the first instance, shaped by the atmosphere created by the language in the poem and not so much by information that appeals to one's senses and sensory experience. The effect of this type of simile is intensified by the fact that, as Hawkes (1980: 3) explains, similes usually involve a "more visually inclined relationship between its elements than metaphor" because of its "'like' or 'as if' structure". When reading a simile, one expects to see. In the above example, that expectation is frustrated and invisibility is foregrounded.

The image above has an underlying antithetical structure. A reader engages with the image by considering the familiar and the known, i.e. the information that falls readily within her/his frame of reference, in this case the words "head" (line 97) and "sun" (line 98), in much the same manner as the German transcendental philosophers considered a thesis. Then a reader starts to grapple with the unfamiliar information (*God's* head; line 97) that does not fit into her/his frame of reference, information that presents something akin to an antithesis to the knowable information. Finally, the reader arrives at a synthesis of both familiar and unfamiliar. One's view of the sun is a synthesis of the underlying antithesis of known and unknown. The image foregrounds unfamiliarity and uncertainty and consequently leads the reader to look for that which is invisible and inscrutable. The resultant synthesis suggests that the sun in the seascape is beyond our sensory grasp, that it contains aspects of the divine and, most importantly, that the mariner has knowledge that other human beings just do not have.

In another simile that relates familiar in terms of unfamiliar, the mariner compares another basic natural element, namely water, to a witch's oils:

The water, like a witch's oils,
Burnt green, and blue and white.

(lines 129-130)

Even though water that seems to burn as the sun shines upon it is a common image and one that Coleridge may have picked up from paintings produced in his time, the fact that the burning water, the tenor, is compared to a "witch's oils", the vehicle, leads one to consider the possibility of a realm where invisible rather than visible things are synthesised. The vehicle describes some characteristics of the water, such as its texture (oily) and its colour (green and blue and white), but the word "witch's" casts even these





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known qualities into uncertainty. As was the case with fire, water in the seascape is described by an image with an underlying antithetical structure. In order to visualise the water in the realm, one must engage in poetic faith; one's imagination has to bring the scene into being by assessing known in terms of unknown. The image aligns the realm with the otherworldly and thereby contributes to the eerie and scary atmosphere of the scene. As water in this simile possesses otherworldly qualities, it leads one to a sense that the world is great and vast.

Another technique that Coleridge uses to foreground unfamiliarity and uncertainty is by the creation of compound words and constructions where the parts are familiar and known, but where the combination of these parts create unfamiliarity. Such images thus also have underlying antithetical structures in that they encompass both familiar and unfamiliar. The mariner describes fire using such an image:

About, about, in reel and rout
The death-fires danced at night.

(lines 127-128)

Not only is it not clear where these fires come from, but more importantly they are given an otherworldly quality via the use of the modifier "death" (line 128). "[D]eath-fires" are not something that can be accessed or interpreted by sensory experience only. The parts of the image ("death" and "fires") are familiar, but the combination ("death-fires") presents unfamiliarity. Known and unknown make up a whole that goes beyond sensory experience. This is reminiscent of Coleridge's letter to Poole quoted earlier: people that see parts, Coleridge explains in the letter, miss the mystery and wonder of the universe. In this image, Coleridge directs the reader to look beyond the known parts to see the whole and appreciate the mystery. A high degree of collocation exists between the "about, about, in reel and rout" (line 127), "fires" and "danced" (lines 128), as all of these contribute to a familiar image of dancing flames, but a low degree of collocation exists between these words and the word "death" (line 128). According to Hawkes (1980: 74) the lower the degree of collocation between elements in an image, the more the image is foregrounded. The low degree of collocation between "death" and the other descriptors in the image above thus draws attention to the unknown and impossible. The unknown "death-fires" that dance in a familiar way, like ordinary fire, bring the scene almost into the mind's eye. The uncertainty that is thus created makes the realm more mysterious.

Both fire images (death-fires and the sun) contain familiar and unfamiliar and contribute to the sense that the world is immense and inscrutable. As both contain aspects unknowable, it is the synthesising imagination that makes sense dialectically of the seascape that confuses sensory experience. It does so by first reflecting on the familiar, then attempting to assess the





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unfamiliar in terms of the familiar and eventually synthesising familiar and unfamiliar in order to grasp and visualise, albeit partially, what is described. Similarly, the mariner described the approach of the ghost ship against the setting sun thus:

And straight the Sun was flecked with bars,
(Heaven's Mother send us grace!)
As if through a *dungeon-grate* he peered
With broad and burning face.

(lines 177-180; my italics)

Again, "dungeon" and "grate" are familiar words, but the combination of the two words within this context presents unfamiliarity. The image is thus constructed upon an underlying antithesis of familiar and unfamiliar. Like "death" in the previous example, "dungeon" creates a spooky atmosphere. The emotive value of this image is strong and it creates an ominous and threatening atmosphere, but does not bring a very specific picture to mind. It cannot be apprehended with reference to sensory experience only. Despite its familiar parts, the image retains an element of uncertainty, creating a scene that underscores the idea that the universe surpasses human comprehension.

The same is true of the image "*spectre-bark*" (line 202) that describes the ship and of the "*elfish light*" (line 275) that illuminates the water-snakes. Even though the modifier "spectre" and the adjective, "elfish" contribute to the atmosphere of the realm and add otherworldly shades to "bark" and "light", they do not really contribute to the reader's visualisation of these phenomena. The head ("bark") and noun ("light") still carry familiar associations, but the parts of the image that usually narrow the meaning down, are imprecise and foreground an uncertainty regarding the visible features. "[S]pectre" and "elfish" appeal to the imagination rather than to the senses and create vagueness and uncertainty. As a result one has to suspend one's disbelief willingly to form a mental picture of both the ghost ship and the light in the mariner's world. One has to synthesise concrete and vague, familiar and unfamiliar into something that encompasses both. In all the examples above, the unfamiliarity that comes into being by the combination of familiar words hints at the transcendent.

These images comprise something familiar but also an element beyond the senses; their vagueness engages poetic faith and they elicit the imagination in making sense of the world. The images confront the reader with familiar, sensory information (like "bark" and "light"), but also with information that appeals to the imagination ("elfish" and "spectre"), creating an underlying antithesis. The reader's poetic faith must resolve the disparate information and shape the world presented in the poem. Put differently, an active imagination is the synthesising faculty that makes sense of the underlying antithesis of familiar and unfamiliar.





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The underlying antithetical structure of both the similes and compound words discussed above creates a sense of mystery, because it simultaneously reveals a world, but also keeps it hidden: it is as though Coleridge creates a world by hiding it. He gives some clues as to what the world looks like, but in essence it remains inscrutable, enforcing the idea that the whole contains both visible and invisible. The antitheses underlying such images make the realm strange, evasive and seemingly far away. The inscrutability of a realm created in this way leaves one searching for the whole, and makes one aware of the immensity of the world. By always only showing a part, and hinting at that which remains hidden, Coleridge makes one curious about the whole, especially those parts of the whole that are not revealed. The reader has to synthesise familiar and unfamiliar, known and unknown and the synthesis suggests that the world is vaster than we can comprehend. By enticing the imagination to see the “elfish light” and “God’s head” Coleridge makes the invisible visible. The antitheses not only cultivate a belief in the invisible, but also elicit the unifying/modifying/synthesising imagination. It cultivates poetic faith.

Another manner in which Coleridge creates underlying antitheses in images, is by juxtaposing possible and impossible. Coleridge “paint[s] towards the imagination” (Coleridge 2000: 392) when he describes the seascape using images of things that can be visualised, but that do not really exist. Such images fall outside our frames of reference and only through poetic faith can we visualise the realm. By presenting us with an image where the language makes sense but that simultaneously clashes with what we believe is possible, Coleridge puts one’s poetic faith to use to visualise what is described. In other words, one has to willingly suspend one’s disbelief to form a mental picture of what the image describes.

One of the best examples in the poem where Coleridge leads one *to see* the invisible is in the description of the third element, namely air. The mariner relates:

The air is cut away before
And closes from behind.

(lines 424-425)

Coleridge makes the invisible visible by describing the impossible as possible. In this example the language does not “hide” visual information. Air is an invisible substance; Coleridge makes us see air by describing it as a thick substance that claustrophobically surrounds the ship. Air not only paradoxically becomes visible but also gains an otherworldly quality. The language of the image makes sense and creates a sense of familiarity, but the whole, when assessed through one’s sensory experience, creates unfamiliarity. The image guides one to a vast and inexplicable realm and foregrounds invisibility that causes uncertainty and the uncertainty conjures imagination. The imagery hovers between certainty and uncertainty and the





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imagination's synthesis of these opposites brings about the sense that the world is inscrutable.

In the case of all three elements discussed above, viz. fire, water and air, one has to suspend one's disbelief and use one's creative imagination to make sense of and understand the duality present in the mariner's world. The language brings about poetic faith that actively constitutes and shapes the realm. The macrocosmic configurations of the realm are evasive. The last element, namely earth, is markedly absent from and invisible in the realm. Throughout the entire journey, the mariner refers not once to earth. Only at the very end of the poem is a reference to a "bay" (line 474). This makes the seascape all the more overwhelming. In the typical repetitive style of a ballad, the earthlessness of the realm is emphasised in part II of the poem:

Water, water, every where
And all the boards did shrink;
Water, water, every where
Nor any drop to drink.

(lines 119-122)

The fact that the poem is set in a world where the framing elements (water, fire and air) preclude sensory comprehension and where one element (earth) is almost completely missing, directs one to engage in poetic faith and to consider the immensity of the realm created. It emphasises the role of the synthesising imagination in shaping the realm by synthesising known and unknown. One can only see the world in one's mind's eye by trusting one's imagination. Within this vague setting Coleridge proceeds to place more evasive and partially invisible phenomena using images that foreground the unknown, unfamiliar and uncertain.

On board the ghost ship, whose features are described using several images that contain known and unknown, are two crew members: Death and Life-in-Death. There is no description whatsoever of Death, rendering him/her invisible. Life-in-Death is described using images relating to the senses and images appealing to imagination:

Her lips were red, her looks were free,
Her locks were yellow as gold:
Her skin was as white as leprosy,
The Night-mare Life-in-Death was she,
Who thicks man's blood with cold.

(lines 190-194)

In this stanza highly sensual and visualisable images and evasive ones alternate and emphasise the juxtaposition of that which falls within and that which falls outside one's frame of reference. In this "description" Life-in-





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Death is almost brought to the mind's eye, but the impression and feeling that she conveys are much stronger than her visual image. As her name suggests, she partakes of both the familiar and the transcendent. It is thus fitting that she is described in this antithetical manner, with images pertaining to this realm, images engaging the senses, and images pertaining to a realm beyond, and that Death is not described at all. In the case of Life-in-Death the familiar and unfamiliar are juxtaposed in such a way that they draw one's attention towards the unfamiliar (her nightmarish qualities are more interesting than her red lips, for example). The imagination's synthesis brings Life-in-Death, as indeed the entire realm, into being. Both Death and Life-in-Death serve to remind one of the immensity of the realm, of its aspects that preclude vision. Furthermore, much of the information regarding Death and Life-in-Death and their ghost ship is introduced in the form of questions. These questions too foreground the uncertainty surrounding the two characters:

Are those her sails that glance in the Sun
Like restless gossamers?

Are those her ribs through which the Sun
Did peer as through a grate?
And is that woman all her crew?
Is that a Death and are there two?
Is Death the woman's mate?

(lines 183-189)

The questions and the presence of known and its antithesis unknown contribute to make the realm accessible only through the synthesising imagination and to create a realm that seems great and vast and beyond our sensory comprehension, a realm that falls almost outside our frames of reference. The images are not descriptive in the traditional sense of the word but rather contribute to the atmosphere and defamiliarisation of the realm. The effect of this is that one is constantly reminded that there is more to the realm than is conveyed by the descriptions; the "descriptive" techniques serve to reinforce the quotation at the beginning of the poem, namely that there are more invisible than visible phenomena in the world. The reader can only visualise the realm of the mariner through the synthesising activity of poetic faith. Still, the images make the realm seem overwhelming. By alluding to that which is not visible, Coleridge focuses the attention on the immensity of the universe. He thus points to a reality transcending that which can be perceived through the senses.

Known and unknown also combine in the following example:

The very deep did rot: O Christ!
That ever this should be!





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Yea, slimy things did crawl with legs
Upon a slimy sea.

(lines 123-126)

Each reader's "picture" of the slimy things may be different, as the synthesising imagination merges possible and impossible, visible and invisible. This stanza guides one to see things that are absent from and invisible in actuality. The poetic devices used in this stanza further obscure the movement of the slimy things. "Crawl" is a clumsy, ungraceful movement. The "s"-alliteration and the iambic foot in this stanza, however, suggest a flowing, regular and smooth movement. Even though the associations one has with the word "crawl" are probably predominant when visualising the movement of the slimy things, the sound subliminally negates these associations. One's natural inclination to visualise what is described is problematised by two antithetical, contradictory modes of description. The duality thus created may hamper visualisation of the creature's manoeuvres. Because their movements are elusive, they stimulate the imagination to synthesise the opposition presented by the image and hint at a transcendent reality where opposites, familiarity and unfamiliarity, form part of a more comprehensive whole. More importantly, by leading one to look outside one's frame of reference and beyond the limits of sensory experience, Coleridge grants a momentary glimpse of a world that transcends actuality – a realm that can only be "entered" with the aid of the imagination.

Similarly, in the desolate and abnormal seascape the mariner finds solace in the sound of birds:

Sometimes a-dropping from the sky
I heard the sky-lark sing;
Sometimes all little birds that are,
How they seem to fill the sea and air
With their sweet jargoning!

(lines 358-362)

This seems easy enough to picture, but it is highly unlikely to find a selection of little birds in the middle of the ocean, especially in the middle of a seascape with virtually no reference to earth. The appeal to the imagination is intensified if one takes into consideration that skylarks (line 359), contrary to what their name suggests, are sedentary, inland birds (see for example Anon. 2001). Again the reader is left to see and hear the birds in the middle of the ocean through the willing suspension of disbelief. The choice of the word "seem" (line 361) again foregrounds the uncertainty that informs much of the seascape.

There are several images with underlying antithetical structures in the poem. In addition to these images that direct one to see with the aid of the





imagination, Coleridge uses several other techniques to foreground the uncertainty surrounding visualisation in the mariner's world. They include the mysterious storyteller, the way in which information is conveyed as well as the implementation of an obscure myth as an intertext to the poem.

Images that foreground unfamiliarity, the unknown and uncertainty, lead one to look for meaning not in what is described, but in that which lies beyond. A reader is reliant on her/his imagination to synthesise familiar and unfamiliar and to make sense of the great and vast realm that Coleridge creates. Through "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner" Coleridge leads us to "contemplate in the mind, as in a picture, the image of a grander and better world" (Coleridge 2000: 49), as is stated in the quotation preceding the poem. This appeal to the imagination leads to the realisation that there are dimensions of the universe that transcend understanding. This, according to Coleridge is the right and truthful understanding of the universe and it is possible only as a result of the imagination. J.R. Barth (1986: 25) succinctly summarises Coleridge's view of the imagination: "Deeper and more comprehensive than the understanding, the imagination is in fact a faculty of the transcendent, capable of perceiving and in some degree articulating transcendent reality – the reality of higher realms of being, including the divine" (Barth 1986: 25).

The imagination – Coleridge believed – can lead one to a glimpse of what lies beyond. The poet takes a brief look at a realm transcending sensory perception in "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner" using images that problematise vision/visibility through their combination of familiar and unfamiliar.

Coleridge creates images with underlying antithetical structures in other poems too. In "Kubla Khan", in which he explores preclusion thematically, he also combines familiar and unfamiliar phenomena in images in such a way that they hamper one's visualisation of what is described. "Sunny spots of greenery" (line 11) are easy to picture, but what does a "deep *romantic* chasm" (line 12) look like? We are told that Alph is a "*sacred* river" (line 3), that the "deep *romantic* chasm" is a "*savage* place" (line 14). The speaker (the visionary Coleridge) tells us not to even bother picturing the caverns of Xanadu, as they are "*measureless* to man" (lines 4 & 27). Other examples include "*demon-lover*" (line 16) and "*mighty* fountain" (line 19); even the term "*pleasure-dome*" (line 2) brings no specific picture to mind. These images contribute to the atmosphere and mood of the realm, but not to one's visualisation of it. The adjectives "demon", "savage" and "romantic" frustrate attempts to pin down the meaning of the nouns and suggest a reality transcending sensory experience. These images are overwhelming, but do not fit readily into the average reader's frame of reference. As a result one has "to contemplate in the mind as in a picture the image of a greater and better world" (see Coleridge 2000: 49).





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Coleridge had, by the time he had started writing “The Rime of the Ancient Mariner”, never been on any sea or ocean. He therefore had no sensory memory from which he could draw. As Coleridge swears by his “conceptions” and not by his “sight”, his lack of experience was of little significance – he looked towards the imagination to create the realm.

The poem reminds one of the mysteries of the ocean and gives one an understanding of the profundity of nature. After encountering the seascape in the poem, one would not necessarily have answers to the mysteries of the sea and of nature, but one would entertain the possibility of a greater and vaster reality beyond one's grasp. This understanding is, according to Coleridge, the right way of contemplating the universe.

5 Conclusion: The Significance of the Parallels

The above analysis indicates the ways in which Coleridge guides one to synthesise the familiar and the unfamiliar and thereby projects a specific view of the world that he also advocated in his nonpoetry writings. The basic structure of synthesising antitheses into a whole that encompasses more than its parts, not only underlies the German transcendental idealist thought, but is indeed one of its defining characteristics. As stated before, Coleridge incorporated, especially into *Biographia literaria*, the idea of the synthesis of opposites as well as the idea of an active imagination as highest mental faculty – ideas he gleaned from German philosophers of the time. Perry (1999: 6, 281) states that the germ of all Coleridge's thoughts can be found – with some creativity – in “The Rime of the Ancient Mariner”. The poem, however, predates most of the writings of philosophers that significantly influenced Coleridge.

One can only speculate on possible reasons why the images in the 1798 “The Rime of the Ancient Mariner” reveal the same underlying structure as the writings of the philosophers that would become evident more explicitly in Coleridge's later prose writings. Images containing antitheses occur too frequently in Coleridge's poetry to be a mere coincidence. Such images occur even in poems that do not deal with the otherworldly, for example the “secret ministry” (line 1) and the *strange* ... silentness” (lines 9-10) and the “abstruser musings” (line 6) in “Frost at Midnight” (1798).

Yet, to claim that in the composition of images Coleridge intentionally planned underlying antitheses that would lead readers into a dialectic process and that he thereby anticipated a structure of thought which would keep some of the most influential philosophers busy for some 150 years, is to tread on dangerous ground, largely because “The Rime of the Ancient Mariner” is a poem. It is neither a philosophical treatise, nor necessarily (despite several critics' autobiographical readings of the poem – see Ashton 1996: 126) an exposition of his own views. It cannot be claimed incontro-





vertibly that Coleridge wanted to express philosophical truths in the poem, as his own later criticism of the poem confirms (see Coleridge [1830] 2000: 593-594).

I offer two possible explanations: Coleridge may either subconsciously have been influenced by Kant and other pre-1798 idealist writings. A second, related possibility could be linked to a claim that Coleridge made: he namely, throughout his life and especially at the end of it, claimed that he simultaneously and independently thought the same thoughts as the German philosophers of his time (see Coleridge's denial of charges of plagiarism in *Biographia literaria* IX, Coleridge 2000: 235 and Stempel 1971). Virtually nobody believes him for fairly obvious reasons. If indeed he came up with the idea of the reconciliation of opposites, this reading provides evidence of at least a subconscious awareness of the idea of the dialectic. In both instances the nature of the images could indicate a Zeitgeist so strong that it also found expression in the manner that Coleridge rendered the mariner's seascape.

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